Choosing Great Programs

Rick Mohr, August 2013

Once we get good at choosing great dances, we want to arrange them in great programs. Whether you're planning a program in advance (because you have a good idea what level of dancers you'll get) or choosing dances on-the-fly on stage, careful consideration will improve your choices.

Ask yourself for each slot, "What dance would be absolutely the greatest right here?" Then keep working at it until you really believe the answer. We want the dancers to say "Wow, that was a great dance!!" after every one.

Specifically, we want to:

- Make sure each dance fits into the **shape of the evening**
- Create **contrast** in consecutive dances

Consider the shape of the evening

You'll have your own ideas of what's important in shaping the evening. Here are some of mine:

- Introduce basic figures early
- More neighbor interaction early, more partner interaction late
- Stay in minor set for dance #1, #2 (or longer)
- Non-contra periodically — mixer / square / 4-face-4 (Mixer can be good as dance #3)
- Most distinctive/challenging dances in the middle of the evening
- "Cruiser" to end each half (high-energy, all-moving, not confusing)
- Start second half with something more challenging
- Ease off complexity for last 2 dances

Create contrast in consecutive dances

Here are some things to consider for creating contrast in consecutive dances (and throughout the evening):

- Different figures
- Different distinctive figures
- Different progressions
- Smooth vs. balancey
- Challenging vs. easier, at whatever level. (Callers often like more complex dances. Dancers like a challenge, but they like a mindless groove too.)
- High energy vs. calmer

That's a manageable set of considerations to balance, but it can be surprisingly tricky to come up with something truly killer (where each dance feels absolutely the greatest).

My process

My goal for an evening of dancing is to give everyone the most interesting and fun set of dances they can handle.

Here's my process when it's possible to plan a program in advance.

1. Think about the mix of dancing skills I expect.
2. Sort my current good dances into 3 piles:
    - Yes—I'm excited to call this dance and I think they can handle it
    - No—I don't think they can handle it or I don't feel like calling it
    - Maybe—an appropriate dance but for whatever reason isn't in my "excited" category today
3. Following the "shape of the evening" ideas above, put some key dances from the "Yes" pile in position. Perhaps the first 2 dances, and/or the non-contras, and/or the more challenging ones.
4. Fill in other dances. How many of my "Yes" pile can I get in there without sacrificing shape or contrast?
5. When I have a draft program, read through all of the dances looking for problems. Oh look, two dances in a row have Swing / Circle Left ¾ / Swing. Oops, these three consecutive dances all have some kind of hey. Hmm, the dance after my most challenging dance is kind of complex, I should pick an easier one to give their brains a rest. Ack, two dances in the second half have Petronellas. Hmm, my first-half dances are all good for beginners but there's nothing too interesting for the experienced dancers. Gee, I have 3 high-energy balancey dances in a row, maybe I should change one to a smooth dance and ask for a calmer tune.

It's not uncommon for me to spend 1-2 hours planning a program for a 3 hour dance. But it's so great when you get it right.

If you manage to work out a program well in advance it can be great to let it sit for a while (hours or days) and take another look or get feedback from a friend. Chances are you'll see opportunities for improvement.